

Najib Ghadbian  
Assistant Professor of Political Science &  
Middle East Studies  
University of Arkansas - Fayetteville  
April 21, 2005

### **Testimony to House Committee on International Relations Challenges & Prospects of Political Liberalization in Syria**

- The failure of the 'Damascus Spring, '2000-2001'
- Current prospects for reform
- Syrian opposition groups, domestic & external
- How might the US best promote reform and citizen participation?

Democratic change in Syria seems possible again for the first time in many years. Resilient home-grown opposition groups have begun to emerge from their weakened conditions to rebuild and reach out to each other on a basis of commitment to human rights and democratic processes. They have been encouraged by the example of the Lebanese people standing up to Syrian military domination and by democratization measures moving forward elsewhere in the Arab world. Ultimately, lasting and healthy systemic transition can only come from within. It is possible for these positive developments initiated by Syrians of long-term commitment to the improvement of Syria to be encouraged in their forward course by the international community, particularly the United States.

Bashar al-Asad's early days as President of Syria, which began in June 2000, were dubbed "the Damascus Spring." Syrians pressing for the expansion of civil society openly held meetings for the first time in years and began political activities that seemed to be tolerated by the new regime. Only six months after Bashar's succession, however, this "Spring" was nipped in the bud. The young Asad's relative youth, Western education, and potential as a reformer proved less relevant than the forces of the status quo ante. Today, almost five years after the ascent of Bashar, the Syrian regime has failed to realize genuine political and economic reforms.

Three factors have weighed against the prospects for political and economic reforms in Syria. These are 1) the 'old guard' of the regime, 2) Bashar's inability to lead and his ambivalence toward change, and 3) the regime's strategy of deflecting the Syrian public's attention to dire regional and international issues in order to evade the domestic issues and to avoid having to make any concessions to the rights of the Syrian people.

Despite the crackdown on what came to be known during the Damascus Spring as 'the Civil Society Movement' (or 'Mujtama' Madani') movement, and despite the imprisonment of ten of its leaders, people in the Syrian dissent both inside and outside Syria have managed to utilize every chink and opening to press for the major opposition demands: the end of authoritarian Baathist rule, and the restoration of civil liberties to all Syrians. The Syrian opposition is not a unified body, but clusters of groups reflecting the

diverse nature of Syrian society. It consists of liberal intellectuals, human rights activists, artists, the religious right, Arab nationalists, Kurdish political parties, and repressed political parties from far left to far right, from communist to deeply conservative. These opposition elements have survived forty years of repression and exclusion under one-party rule. They have only recently begun to rebuild from shattered, weakened conditions.

There are several positive features of the Syrian opposition. First, opposition groups have succeeded in formulating a degree of consensus about the main opposition goals. These include the following five core demands:

- lifting the martial law that has been in effect since 1963
- releasing political prisoners, some languishing for decades
- allowing the free formation of political parties
- amending the constitution to end the Baath monopoly over power
- and conducting free and fair elections in which all political forces compete for people's votes.

A second positive factor about the Syrian opposition groups is that they all express the resolve to effect change in Syria through peaceful and gradual processes. A third point of information about the Syrian opposition which you should know is that the Muslim Brotherhood of Syria, who make up an important segment of the opposition, are moderate Islamists. They have dropped extremist elements among them, endorsed the demand for democratic rule, and expressed firm support for minority and women rights.

The Syrian regime alleges that the alternative to Asad's rule is either Islamic extremism or civil war and chaos. This is not true. Most Muslim Syrians are either moderate or secular. As for Islamists, there are two main components of the Islamic movement in Syria:

- The first is the various groups pursuing charitable and social work inside Syria, such as the followers of the son of the late Grand Mufti, Salah Koftaro.
- The second component of Islamists is the Muslim Brotherhood, long outlawed in Syria.

Neither group is extremist. Both have agreed to work within a democratic framework. The Muslim Brotherhood, in particular, has endorsed the concept of the modern democratic state as the best means to achieve the Islamic values of democratic consultation and social justice. In the state envisioned in their documents, all political forces compete through free and periodic elections.

The claim that chaos will result if the Asad regime is changed is likely to be true only for those in the elite who have exploited their power to enrich themselves illegally. Their habitual channels of self-enrichment will likely be in a state of upheaval should change happen.

There *is* a genuine fear among members of the Alawite minority in Syria who worry about a backlash against them because they are over-represented in the close circle of the Asad's regime. One of the sore points repeatedly raised about the regime,

particularly by members of Syria's Sunni majority, is its clear sectarian bias in favor of the Alawite sect. The Alawite community needs to distance itself from the atrocities committed by members of the Asad regime. Both the Sunni and the Alawite communities need to engage in a process of national reconciliation to overcome the sectarian mistrust between the two groups. This process should include acknowledgement and apology for massacres and atrocities committed by the Alawite-dominated state security forces as well as assassinations and violent attacks committed by the Sunni extremist Islamists in its disastrous period of armed struggle against the Baathist regime from 1976 through the 1980s.

I believe the best guarantee against such a possibility is through creating a true democratic order in which all citizens are equal before the law. Members of the Sunni majority among the opposition ranks must continue to assure the Alawite community that democracy does not only mean majority rule, but also the protection of the rights of minorities and their inclusion and representation at all levels of government.

The least perilous democratic transition takes place when initiated from above. Asad's regime has not demonstrated any willingness to bring about such democratic change. But continued internal demand coupled with international pressure might finally force some members of the Syrian regime to initiate the required reforms. The regime has circulated rumors about far-reaching reforms soon to come out of the General Convention of the Baath party, which is going to take place in June of this year. This might be the very last chance for Bashar to side with the people of Syria against the repressive and corrupt elements of his regime.

Steps that would indicate serious political reform must include lifting martial law, amending the constitution to allow for political pluralism and the unrestricted formation of political parties, and calling for free and fair elections, to be monitored by international observers. Anything short of that is an invitation for the Syrian people to take matters into their hands and chart their own peaceful democratic course to overthrow this regime.

During these critical times, Mr. Chairman, the people of Syria need support from the international community. The Syrian regime's meddling in Lebanese affairs and the recent assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, have led many in the international community to reconsider their position toward this despotic regime. The forced withdrawal of the Syrian military and security forces from Lebanon is likely to isolate and weaken the Baathist regime. This will offer democracy advocates, at home and abroad, an opportunity to push for democratic change.

While I believe that democracy must be a homegrown product, the US, the EU, and the international community can help people in their struggle for democracy. Most Syrians, inside and outside Syria, want change and would welcome support for democratic reform, but are cautious of the potentially high cost of change. Intensifying the suffering of the Syrian people is not the path to change they would support.

It is hoped that the US would support democratic reform by focusing on the following steps:

- First, the US Congress should send a strong message that democracy is at the heart of the change required of Asad's regime.
- Second, the US should press the Syrian government on human rights. The latest report by the Association of Syrian Human Rights shows that there are still about 2,000 political prisoners in Syria. The Syrian government must disclose information about more than 15,000 "missing" individuals; most of them are believed to be executed while in detention between 1980 and 1995. Exiled Syrians should regain the right to get travel documents and go back home unharmed.
- Third, the US should support the demands of most Syrians that the heads of security and members of the regimes who committed atrocities against the Syrian, Lebanese, and Palestinian people be tried for these crimes. Many heads of security and military agencies and their relatives have embezzled millions of dollars from the country and invested the stolen wealth in Western countries. These assets should be frozen and returned to the future Syrian democratic government.
- Fourth, the US government should urge American companies doing business in Syria to disallow any dealings with individuals associated with the repressive and corrupt heads of the security agencies.
- Fifth, the US should support the undergoing efforts by the Syrian opposition to create a broad-based coalition capable of forming a viable alternative to the Asad regime. Emphasis should be placed on home-grown oppositions having a demonstrated record of integrity (which in Syria is measured by years in prison or exile).

Mr. Chairman, Distinguished Members:

The people of Syria deserve better than this despotic and corrupt regime. Syrians are mature enough to rule themselves. Prior to the Baath domination, the Syrian people experienced periods of democracy. They have the cultural habits of democratic participation, even if these are in cold storage at the moment.

Democratic change in Syria is a long-term investment in the international war against terrorism. Democratic Syria will be a stabilizing factor for the whole region. It will improve the chances of democratic transition in Iraq and Lebanon, and it is an essential prerequisite for building a just and lasting peace in the Middle East.

Thank you Mr. Chairman and Committee Members.